

Remedying an Immigrant's Hunger for Home

by Denise Chin

The Reluctant Kitchen Assistant

I used to dislike the time of day when the sun was about to set, families reunited after a long day of school and work, and my mother yelled for me from the far end of the house, our kitchen, to help with dinner. I would have much rather preferred to continue playing in our garden on the swing with my brother. As he climbed it, I would watch with such thrill to see if he would make it or fall to the ground with a great thud, to which I could, if he did fall, smugly tell on him to either parent.

Instead, I would be pulled into the kitchen together with my sister as our nightly meals took shape. Already, a boiling broth of pork bones and *sayur asin* was taking place. What little counter space we had would all be taken up—my mother's plans for frying *ikan kembong*, or Indian mackerel, and top it with spicy-sweet-tangy *sambal*, alongside deep-green *kailan* stir-fried in garlic and oyster sauce. My job was to prepare garlic for the *kailan* and cook the rice that would complete the meal. Oh, I hated it. When I think back about what I hated, I couldn't tell you. Was it the mundaneness of it all? Was it that it took me away from watching my brother's mischief and not being the first to report his naughty ways? —but I did it anyway. Soon, I took on bigger roles. I cooked our nightly vegetable dish, whether it was okra with dried shrimp and garlic (to control the sliminess of the dish, don't add water!), or bitter melon with egg (add a *little* MSG to dull the bitterness, but we won't tell anybody), I did it all.

I never thought I would look back on those early days of being a reluctant kitchen assistant with any fondness, until I moved to the US. Upon leaving my hometown of Kuala Lumpur, I felt a great sense of independence in the kitchen. I could cook whatever my heart desired, whatever I didn't have resentful memories toward, whatever my American roommates did not think foreign. One day it was eggplant parmesan. With such delight, I sliced the bulbous Italian eggplant, coated each disk

in breadcrumbs, and shallow fried them before laying them on a casserole dish to top with tomato sauce. Another time it was wheat berry salad. I cooked wheat berries, not really knowing what to expect from a grain that sounded like a fruit. I could recreate recipes by Nigella and Jamie, and proudly show off photos to my mother, my fellow cooking show companion. “Wah, so cheap *ah* to get parmesan cheese there!” She would say in admiration, and by extension, pride at my opportunity to cook the ingredients she would have to think twice about buying—parmesan cheese costs triple, quadruple most ingredients she could get at the wet market.

Then one day it hit me. I didn’t see it coming, but my heart felt uneasy. Nothing I did could ease the pain and restlessness. Not pizza, nor pasta. Nothing, except thoughts of going to the *pasar malam* and slurping tangy, fishy, *asam laksa* broth, or the hawker center for a bowl of piping hot *kuey teow* noodles with springy fish balls. I was homesick, and the only cure was food; food I couldn’t readily find where I now lived; food I had reluctantly learned how to make years ago.

Reunited with Old Friends

Before I could cook an evocative meal, I needed the right ingredients. My first visit to the Asian supermarket was in Seattle with my Hmong friends. Descendants of hill tribes of modern-day Laos, my new friends and I clicked instantly from our Southeast Asian heritage. One day they invited me to their dorm room for dinner. “Forget cafeteria food. Come over for some curry!”

I entered their room and was immediately hit with the familiar scent of coconut milk simmering in spices. In a rice cooker (an item prohibited in student dorms), simmered a thick, jackfruit-yellow gravy. My dinner, while I was extremely grateful to have, was not the amalgamation of chilli and spices for a deep-flavored gravy with a kick—or Malaysian curry as I knew it. Still, I scooped it over fragrant jasmine rice, cooked in a second contraband rice cooker, and smiled at the familiarity of it all.

When they brought me to the Asian market, I was a mess of emotions: joy, from seeing all the food items I had glossed over back home, but also immense nostalgia. I gazed at the shelves and felt like old friends were surrounding me. Dozens of soy sauce brands and types, tofu in soft, medium and firm varieties, rice sold by the sack (the only way my mother used to buy it to feed a family of five), and shelves and shelves of rice-, wheat-, and bean noodles. I was taken back to a time of chopping, stirring, inhaling of the aroma of spices from my life across the globe. Asian markets would become a place of comfort, especially when I longed for dinners from my childhood.

That day, I hauled more items home than I could carry, breaking my student budget.

Finding a Remedy to that Familiar, Sinking Feeling

Often, homesickness hits during times of festivities back home. Once, it surfaced during *Merdeka* season. My Whatsapp feed buzzed daily with excitement and anticipation over Malaysia's upcoming Independence Day festivities. Where will people be celebrating? Most importantly, what will be on the menu at aunty so-and-so's place? Being new to the town I lived in at the time, away from home, I didn't know of fellow Malaysians who lived nearby to share in the excitement.

A familiar, sinking feeling resurfaced.

The cure to homesickness that most ignites the senses, appeases the palate, and evokes memories has always been to cook food from home. So for a quiet, homesick-laden *Merdeka* that year, I wanted an explosion of flavors for dinner. I embraced the challenge ahead of me, well aware that I was not just committing to hours of labor in the kitchen, but that I would also need to hunt down ingredients I couldn't readily find at an American grocery store.

Coconut milk, eggs, cucumber, peanuts, tempeh—easy. Lemongrass, galangal, turmeric, *ikan bilis* (dried anchovies), dried chillies—these required some hunting.

Sweet potato leaves, *pandan* and banana leaves, kaffir lime leaves—I was definitely flexing my shopping muscles. And lastly, fresh grated coconut—the ingredient that would make or break my meal.

My marketing list took me on a tour of different grocery stores in town, which I was thrilled to do. At the Mexican grocery store, I found dried chillies. At the Chinese market, I found most items, including sweet potato and banana leaves, galangal, and *ikan bilis*. The Vietnamese store sold kaffir lime leaves, albeit frozen. As victorious as I felt to have found everything on my list within driving distance, I thought back to how easily I could get these at the wet market back home. I would frequent different sellers purely from wanting to choose the fresher of the same ingredient. Here, I just took what I could get.

I gave myself ample time to enjoy the process of the meal coming together. I let myself be transported to a period when the smells were a daily occurrence at home, when my mother orchestrated the making of our dinner and my father intermittently entered the kitchen for a spot-check inspection of our meal, nod slightly of approval, and leave to get back to his newspaper.

I placed jasmine rice, washed and drained, into my rice cooker, together with coconut milk, a peeled shallot, knob of ginger, and twist of pandan leaf. I couldn't wait for the steam to release fumes of starchy rice mingling with rich coconut and sweet *pandan*. I painstakingly cleaned *ikan bilis*, another chore evoking resentful kitchen memories that I now laughed at. I peeled and sliced a cucumber, sliding a fork down its length to create a motif for each round.

I blended chillies and shallots to make a fiery paste. To a skillet, I added the paste and let the oil bubble with it. As the chillies cooked, I sneezed. “That’s when you know your sambal has *naik minyak*,” my mother used to say, most scientifically, whenever someone sneezed during *sambal* cooking, indicating its doneness. That theory hasn't seen much failure. I added tamarind paste, sugar, and salt, bringing

these flavors to a beautiful, tangy balance. *Sambal tambrinyu*, a family recipe that often whets the appetite and raises eyebrows in excitement.

Lastly, I wanted to make *rendang*, a dish I did not grow up making—we always bought ready-prepared *rendang* from the *mak cik gerai*, or delightedly tucked into it at a friend's *Hari Raya Eid* open house. So I followed each step religiously: spice paste sautéed with cloves and cinnamon. Coconut milk, lime juice. Tempeh cubes, roasted, became the meat substitute. The flavor profile had elevated, but something didn't feel right. The dish still lacked that sweet, earthy smell that sat comfortably in one's stomach before even tucking in, that *rendang* aroma. The *kerisik* was missing.

I found desiccated coconut at the Indian grocer. The shopkeeper pointed to my prized item in the freezer. I rushed home to roast the coconut then pounded it to its death. The high-pitched sound of the pestle hitting the sides of the mortar were reminiscent of the times my grandmother pounded away to make *sambal belacan*. The oils from the roasted coconut released and the paste turned a dark, caramelized brown. *Kerisik*.

This was it. This was the Merdeka meal I needed to make to appease that emptiness in the pit of my stomach that came from hunger, but mostly from homesickness.

From Reluctance to Reminiscence

I cut rounds of banana leaves, wiped them clean and lined our dinner plates. First, a mound of warm coconut rice in the center of each plate. Then, on the side, a handful of *ikan bilis*, with *sambal tambrinyu*, cucumber, egg, and sautéed sweet potato leaves. Then, ceremoniously, the tempeh *rendang*, gently placed on top of the rice, its stew-like texture making it difficult to part with the serving spoon.

To drink, a scoop of Milo and warm water stirred vigorously, topped with ice and another generous spoonful of Milo. Milo Dinosaur.

We sat down, my husband and I, to a meal that had taken much preparation time, not that I noticed. I had kept myself entertained for hours, enjoying each step of the process. Reminders of different conversations sprung—from my early days in the kitchen to festive Christmastime preparation, rolls of laughter and tears from onion chopping—all jumbled together, leaving me in a transcendental state. I was alone in the kitchen, but I wasn't lonely. My memories had filled the extra space around me, soothing my longing to be home.

Some days I pine for *asam rebus*, its tangy broth flooding steaming rice. Every slurp clears the nasal cavity, thanks to a spice blend that includes turmeric, lemongrass, and galangal simmered in tamarind water. Kesum leaves spread their grassy, zingy scent. The crunch of peppery *ulam raja* works in complementarity with each savory mouthful.

Those are the days when the 2000 miles separating me from home feel like the ends of the earth. When technology, despite its advancements to connect me to loved ones at the touch of my fingertips, fails. The only cure on such days comes from making trips to the Chinese, Vietnamese, Indian, and Mexican grocer to be surrounded by shelves of my old friends. Then cooking to conjure my memories, there to comfort and accompany me as I combine ingredients that bring me back to a time when my brother swung away at sunset, and I, bound to the kitchen, laughed at my sister's heaving sneeze from the *sambal* cooking its way to completion.